Using ‘currere’ to re-conceptualise and understand best practices for effective research supervision

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Abstract
The article explores a way that could be used to facilitate re-conceptualisation of what is essential to doing research supervision work. It highlights the need to deal with the problematic nature of past supervision experiences and the extent to which they impact on the way students are supervised. It argues that acquiring knowledge and understanding of best practice in supervision requires supervisors to embark on a ‘currere’ that will encourage them to investigate the nature of their experience of research supervision. This autobiographical method is emphasised as a means to in depth reflection which would subsequently lead to professional development in the area of supervision. The article suggests using currere as a means to expose and critique the influence and assumptions that underlie orientation to the concept of supervision in order to forge new understanding that will guide practice.

INTRODUCTION

Drawing on the views of Jansen et al. (2004) an effective research supervision process should at least provide context for research learning on the part of the student. They assert that, ‘research learning . . . encompasses but extends beyond the knowledge of how to complete the specific research project (usually the dissertation). It is the totality of learning events that includes the technical competence to deliver a research report as well as the emotional, social, political and cognitive experiences that together constitute such learning’ (Jansen et al. 2004, 79). Effective supervision has an agenda that goes beyond simply completing the report. It also exposes the student to the culture of research, ways of thinking and working in a particular field professional and emotional growth. This means focusing on the body of knowledge in the field and habits of thinking peculiar to the field that should be inculcated to the initiates. As much as the content of the research is important there is also a need to expose students to the ways of thinking and principles that are typical of the field in which research is done.
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Research then is about the process through which the student is initiated in depth to the discipline.

The process of supervision is also dealt with by Rip (2001) when he contends that, effective supervision should create an environment that would introduce students to the world of research and provide intellectual stimulation so that they can grow in the field. This means helping students to appreciate the world of doing research which is focused requirements for degrees and the world of research as practice. Both worlds have particular ways of thinking, working and communicating findings which students should be exposed to. Working this way requires a particular understanding and mindset about what it means to competently supervise students.

Implied here is the need to have supervisors who are ‘T shaped’. According to Rip (2004, 154) in T shaped people ‘. . . the down-stroke represents depth and specialist knowledge in a discipline and the cross-stroke represents breath and flexibility’. A supervisor who has depth and specialist knowledge is in a position to meaningfully encourage students to grasp principles and procedures that are essential in the field being researched. I think this is very crucial as supervisors are to give meaningful guidance in terms of accessing systematic ways of working in the field, what counts as knowledge and also general advice on the relevant literature that would give depth to students’ work. This is also critical in supervision because of the need to introduce students to the two worlds, that of the field being researched and the world of research. The latter is not a world with fixed ways of working and at the same time requires systematic and rigorous thinking if excellence is to be achieved.

Supervisors should also have breath and flexibility in that they are not rigid but allow research to detect what is essential for the students’ to do. This should be done without compromising the criteria and ways of working that would be considered up to standard. Every field has got criteria and procedures or even ways of thinking that should be followed and the supervisor should help students to grasp and comply with such. Drawing on the views of Rip (2004) when this is the case the research process could lead to work that is of excellence and relevance to the field. Of course this does not just fall into place, the supervisor has to focus on creating an environment or room for students and their work to reflect such. This can be linked to Wisker’s (2005, 62) argument that ‘. . . knowing when to guide, or change work, and when to allow the student to get on with it and own the project’ is critical in introducing students to the world of research. They need to develop autonomy that will encourage them to have agency for their research. In this case they ‘assume greater responsibility for, and take charge of their own learning’ (Little 1991, 4). Working this way will encourage a situation whereby students will not only own the research work but also develop crucial values and beliefs about what is acceptable behaviour and in this case it would be in relation to their role as researchers. At the end it is about learning how to conduct research, being responsible, motivated and making the right decisions where appropriate.
It is the understanding of the demands and expectations that research supervision work places on academic staff, especially new ones that universities are attempting to prepare these individuals for their responsibilities. In order to create a supervision environment that would encourage the practices discussed by Jansen et al. (2004), Rip (2004), Wisker (2005) and Rip (2006) new supervisors need to go through some form of professional development.

TRENDS IN SUPPORTING AND DEVELOPING RESEARCH SUPERVISORS

The article is not empirical but a response to my experience of a Research Supervision module focused on equipping and preparing new academic staff to do supervision work. The Cape Peninsula University of Technology has a programme for all new academic staff that attempts to address professional development especially with regard to issues of teaching and learning. The Research Supervision module is part of this programme and individuals can choose to do it. This is because not everybody has supervision responsibilities. Essential to developing staff in the programme is providing them with theory and exposure to debates around issues that directly relate to their day to day responsibilities of which supervision is one of them. Unwittingly or not the nature of teaching in the programme assumes that exposure to content might change the way people think.

Hirst (1982) contends that understanding does not come through exposure to knowledge but through engaging with the logical relations crucial to the acquisition of a particular form of knowledge. He insightfully explains the significance of understanding when he argues that it is about learning concepts and using them to achieve a particular state of mind. As a result, the development of any degree of understanding in any area of knowledge relates to the mastery of appropriate ways of working and thinking. As Hirst (1982, 292) puts it, ‘to see things is not just to register things for what they are, it is for them to be picked out or articulated in our consciousness. . . . what the development of understanding involves is, in fact, a progressive differentiation of our experience through the acquisition of new concepts under which it is intelligible. . . .’ In short, understanding is not just awareness of ideas but also involves acquiring the concepts essential to that form of knowledge. Applied to research supervision, this means understanding the concepts underpinning it not only familiarity with the procedures it promotes but also understanding why the procedures are important and how they need to be adapted when dealing with the different students’ needs. This view convinced me that it was important to reflect on the nature of interaction processes that new academics involved in the Research Supervision module that is part of the professional support they receive enable them to achieve understanding in the manner described by Hirst.

This highlights a need to expand on current methods of staff development by bringing in strategies that foregrounds in depth engagement with new knowledge especially through deconstructing previous knowledge as a way of building deep understanding.
Crucial to this is an attempt to deal with concepts and principles essential to what needs to be done drawing on the academic staff’s experiences to enable them to achieve the paradigm shift or develop new insight necessary for them to function as supervisors. According to Barnnet (1994) this is a dispositional form of understanding that requires careful attention to the educational process. Implied here is that before academic staff can be deemed competent (Hager and Beckket 1995) to deal with supervision responsibilities they need an educational experience that would deal with their prior educational experiences and knowledge in relation to supervision.

This is even more so because Wisker (2005) alerts us to the fact that what supervisors bring into the research supervision process often than not is influenced by how they were supervised themselves, ‘trickle down effect’. Past experiences constantly directs the learning environment and the nature of structures supervisors create for their students. This means exposure to knowledge for practice (Cochran Smith and Lytle 1999) which in this case would be what supervisors should do when supervising students, will have limited impact in solving the problems that are normally experienced by students in research supervision process.

To deal with all these dynamics in professional development, this article suggests that academic staff should engage in an inquiry that will examine closely their experiences so that they could begin to identify relationships and disjuncture between their previous knowledge, what they are exposed to and what is expected of them as supervisors. This is based on an understanding that learning is a complex process which can not be necessarily achieved through didactic methods. Knowing what supervision should be about does not mean or guarantee change in behaviour. This view in concurred by Wisker (2005, 42) when she argues that, ‘reflecting on previous experience of supervision is a good way to start defining good practice, and ways of establishing sound ground rules, building on your own experiences of supervising and being supervised’. For me the question became how best supervisors could go about the reflection process. The idea of a ‘currere’ as advocated by Pinar (1975) became very interesting as a way of creating room for development through reflection with the aim to re-conceptualise what would be best and effective practice for conducting supervision work.

LOGIC OF INQUIRY – THE CONCEPT OF CURRERE

Pinar’s (1975) concept of currere foregrounds a self-reflective process that culminates in re-conceptualisation of an individual’s understanding of what a particular practice is all about. Its focus is not only on taking people to their past but it also open possibilities for expanding and appreciating knowledge acquired through didactic forms of learning. As a process the currere becomes an investigation of an individual’s subjectivities and educational experiences as they shape beliefs and assumptions on what counts as practices in a particular context. It allows a thoughtful and critical inquiry into one’s work through questioning the underlying structures that directs and organise how people think and work. This concept puts emphasis on using personal interpretation
of the past, present, future educational experiences to generate meaning and further re-conceptualise what needs to be done. The currere as a journey involves four steps which are regressive, progressive, analysis and synthesis which are discussed in detail below.

**Wondering back into your past**

This is the first step that allows people to dig up their past as they describe their experiences responding to the question that says; what happened in that educational experience? This account suggests that past events are significant as a learning resource for developing practice in curriculum work. Critical to this step is that past experience need to be brought out in the open if it is to be looked at critically without assuming that what is in this past world is all bad. In this particular context, this would be one’s experiences of doing research and being supervised such as, how feedback was communicated, the manner in which discussions were conducted and what you perceived to be your role. It should be noted that the story developed here might not necessarily be a duplication of the actual experience but it will still be ‘rich’ enough to be used a learning resource. As pointed out earlier these experiences hovers over the present and if they are not looked at critically they tend to direct how an individual conduct his/her work. In short, curriculum work reflects who people are in terms of their past and what they are trying to achieve.

Past experiences should not be ignored otherwise, ‘the present then becomes an acting out of the past, the super imposition of past issues and situations and persons onto the present’ (Pinar 1975, 22). This is a view that is also emphasized by Pinar et al. (1995, 55) when they say, ‘while we are immersed in our personal histories, our practices are not simply products of our intent and will’. Unless the past is attended to, in all likelihood people will be in the past while in the present. It is important to look at all the taken for granted experiences so that supervisors can loosen themselves from it. The regression stage is crucial in helping people to detach themselves from acculturated ways of behaving.

**Identifying best practice through imagining the future**

It is also important as an individual to be clear on what practices are not yet in your curriculum text but you aspire for them. In step two which is progressive, the focus is on encouraging individual to look at their current practice and identify what is not yet there. At this stage it is crucial to think of one’s vision and philosophy with regard to what is essential to it. The future informs the present the same way as the past experiences. It is important to imagine your future (where you are going in terms of supervision) as a supervisor and describe it. For instance, the future might be about creating an environment for students to be researchers that will go beyond mere submitting the research report but also access the field in which they are working and the
world of research. It is important to think carefully and then describe what is essential to realising the intended or ideal way of working. This further allows for a situation where an individual appreciate what intentions means in terms of practice when doing their work.

**Taking stock and deconstruction of the snap shots**

The regression and progression steps are a source of data for analysis and critique of practice. In this stage the requirement is to juxtapose the three snap shots that is, past (how one experienced supervision), present (how you currently supervise research students) and future (what you wish to do to make the research process meaningful for the student) with the intention to analyse the three. Looking at the past and future will clarify to the gap that exist in current practice and further help in understanding curriculum work.

It is important to identify gaps between the imagined or intended practices and current practice so that there is an understanding of whether there is a relationship between the two. It is of essence to also look at the relationship between past experience and current practice especially if there is a gap between the intended and current practice. Underlying the analysis is as attempt to establish how the past is in the present and also what elements of the future can be seen in current practice. For instance, ask questions such as what practices emerge in all three snap shots and what appears only in the past, future or present? It is important during the analysis to look into practices in relation to how well they create room or space for meaningful learning. Since this is a personal journey the focus of the analysis is simply what was helpful to you, what was not and what you would like to achieve when supervising students.

**Renewal of pedagogy through synthesizing past present and future**

The focus of the reflection on experiences is that they become the basis for transformation of discourses as they appear in an individual’s curriculum work. This stage would involve looking at what was happening in stage three with the hope to bring together or make sense of everything. Reconstruction is about coming up with ideas of what best supervision practices should be about. It is important to heed the views of Pinar et al. (1995, 9) when they say in this stage it is essential to keep in mind that ‘our students should know the field as the field is now, not as it was when you were a graduate student’. Implied here is that what we draw from the past, present and future should be guided by our understanding of what it means to do research supervision in higher education currently and not how we experienced it. Thus the re-conceptualised supervision practices draws from past, present and imagined supervision practices.

The process at this stage will be guided by the theory on supervision that an individual supervisor is exposed to. This means thinking carefully about how doing supervision has been described by authors such as Jansen et al. (2004), Rip (2004) and Wisker (2005) so that what is selected as effective supervision practices would foreground an appreciation of those views.
Drawing further on Pinar et al.’s (1995) work, the concept of currere creates an environment for curriculum understanding critical in developing a mindset that provides the possibility of generating structures that will be conducive for students to learn rather than to technically engage in procedures. In the context of research supervision it would involve asking questions of feasibility instead of prioritising the mastery of routine procedures. In this case, it implies expecting supervisors to be able to reflect and display critical understanding of, first, the supervision principles, second, the context for its implementation and third, an appreciation of what is embodied and meaningful to supervision practice as a means to fulfil the requirements of doing research in higher education. This way of working highlights the importance of building on past educational experiences to achieve learning that will change consciousness and the way people behave (Pinar 1975; Giroux 1995; Kincheloe 1999).

CURRERE AS CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT MODEL

Meaningful perceptions and understanding of what counts as effective research supervision is based on how people deal with their experiences and the knowledge they are exposed to, it is a by product of the reflective journey. It can be argued that there is a strong link between the reflective journey and capacity development as the individual begin to see the practice in a more meaningful way. This link can be supported by drawing on Giroux’s (1995) views when he says that amongst other ways, competency in a particular practice could be developed by allowing people to express and assess their own experiences in relation to the demands of the practice. His views alerts us to the social, political and cultural boundaries that place demands on the way skills related to research supervision could be developed and suggest that one way of doing this is by allowing individuals to critically analyze how their past experiences positions them in relation to what they are expected to do. It is this process that will allow supervisors to transform their thinking from how they experienced educational events into an understanding of what their professional roles are. The importance of this development is emphasised by Kincheloe (1999, 98) when he says ‘it is only when as supervisors we are able to re-conceptualise the field and its requirements that we will be able to control our professional destinies as supervisors and release our students from the burden of history as we experienced it’. The expectation is that once supervisors have dealt with their past educational experiences they will emerge with new understanding which will guide their professional work.

This suggests that individuals should take seriously the knowledge and experiences that constitute who they are and drawing upon what they know about their own lives (Giroux 1995), as a reference point for facilitating awareness and development of practices that can bring about effective supervision. Embarking on a currere (Pinar 1975) is seen as an approach that encourages people to investigate and learn from their experiences through identifying and interpreting practices that are relevant and useful in ensuring effective supervision thus becoming competent in their responsibilities. Hager and Beckett (1995) explain this in terms of the way the concept of competency is understood. They highlight
that the ability to perform tasks is crucial for competence but not sufficient. ‘Abilities are central to the concept of competence however, not sufficient if not applied to performance of tasks with an overall conception of what one’s work is about. Competence is essentially a relation between abilities or capabilities of people and the satisfactory completion of appropriate task(s)’ (Hager and Beckett 1995, 2). To focus on only exposing supervisors to best practice as described in literature could lead to impoverished competency standards. Implied in this is that when supervisors concentrate on helping students complete research projects, they also should not neglect the fact that they need to supervise the process in an effective way. This would mean working in a way that would encourage research learning (Jansen et al. 2004) and also introduce students to the world of research and doing research (Rip 2001). They need to bring out all that is essential to supervising research in a particular subject in order to be seen as professionally competent to do the work.

Curriculum work can be taken as a text that can be read for meaning and interpreted to reach an understanding of one’s reality with regard to practice in supervision. It reflects an intersection of all the separate discourses (such as past experiences and ideal ways of working) and other issues that influence curriculum work. Pinar et al. (1995) define texts as human actions and practices as they are open to reading and interpretation. To re-conceptualise practice requires reading and interpreting the discourses produced or reflected in curriculum work as a text. Giroux emphasises that if education has to build people’s capacity it must not only expose them to critique that can be used to investigate and inquire into practice but it should be taken further to a language of possibilities. This is a language that creates opportunities for improving and reshaping practice. This means re-conceptualisation does not end with criticizing practice but also involves forging a new understanding of how best work can be done.

For both the new and experienced research supervisors there is a need for introspection that will lead to some form of professional development. This does not only compel people to revisit their past, take note of the present and also think about where they want to go with the student, it also provides structures for all supervisors to account for or explain their practice to themselves. It is a process that allows awareness, people cannot change practices if they are not aware of what they are doing neither can they practice their espoused curriculum/theory unless they are aware of the gap between what they say they are doing and what they are actually doing. The claim made here is that reflecting on experience and one’s vision on supervision work using formal knowledge (knowledge-for-practice) could prove useful in fostering the required change in the mindset of supervisors.

CONCLUSION

Professional development programmes for research supervisors should be sites to acquire professional competence. The article highlights that to support formal knowledge in Research Supervision Module, it is important that new supervisors do self-introspection as a means to develop understanding of what is expected of them. This means a well thought-out and coordinated system of balancing between theory and
reflective activities based on principles embedded in research supervision would be invaluable for educational provision process. Developing good sense in people is not only a question of introducing a new way of thinking, but it is also about renovating and reconstructing existing perceptions that inform the way people act. It is when supervisors have gone through theory and the reflective journey that they will develop a new supervision culture and philosophy which will be rooted in the expectations of research supervision in higher education. In short, the intensity of the intellectual engagement in staff development programmes should create and encourage a new way of thinking and working that will inform the way practitioners engage with practice.

REFERENCES


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